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ABSTRACT

The Vietnam Era GI Bill was clearly influenced by the social and educational success of World War II veterans, but also reflected the policy objectives of equity and access of the 1960's. A 1987 monograph by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported that 60% of all Vietnam Era veterans received some training benefit from the GI Bill, but the survey did not address the percentage who finished their training. Other research, in fact, suggests that participation in postsecondary education using the GI Bill is problematic for Vietnam veterans, and that, despite high motivation, many veterans had a more difficult time realizing their educational goals than did veterans of previous wars. Reasons may include the following: (1) the ambiguous nature of the Vietnam War was not conducive to developing stable and mature adults, and difficult psychological and social adjustments were required of veterans returning to a critical American society; (2) the nature of combat in Vietnam led to an incidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) estimated at 15.2% of all male theater veterans; and (3) Vietnam veterans received about 50% less in relative benefits than World War II veterans, forcing Vietnam veterans to work while attending college. A recent study of 1,006 Vietnam veterans found that financial constraints were the primary reason that veterans decided not to attend college on the GI Bill or discontinued their enrollment before graduation. Of those who attended college, only 47% completed their educational goals, with minority veterans and veterans with PTSD achieving their goals at even lower rates. Now that the Vietnam Era GI Bill has expired, community colleges represent the best hope for a third chance at education for Vietnam veterans, who need the caring expertise of community colleges more than ever. (AC)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES: KEY TO VIETNAM ERA GI BILL SHORTFALL

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The widely held assumption, both in and out of higher education circles, is that Vietnam veterans have done fairly well in pursuit of post-secondary education. This speculation is typically based on the perceived success of the original WW II GI Bill, the first time the federal government ventured into student assistance (U. S. Congress, 1978). So dramatic was the perceived success of the first GI Bill that Starr (1973) characterized it's historic significance by declaring that "Education has been America's modern frontier, and the GI Bill has been its homestead act" (p. 235). The genesis of our "learning Society" and the vision of "lifelong learning" are clearly the social and educational by-products of the WW II and subsequent GI Bills.

The Vietnam Era GI Bill was established in 1966. This federal program also known as Chapter 34 benefits, and the "Noncontributory GI Bills, was clearly influenced by the perceived social and educational success of WW II veterans. Its purposes also reflected the emerging educational concerns of equity and access, major policy objectives of the 1960'S. The Vietnam Era GI Bill was designed to serve three educational purposes. The first was to provide access to higher education to persons who might otherwise be unable to afford it. The second was to provide vocational readjustment and restore lost educational opportunities for those whose careers had been interrupted by military service. Lastly, the GI Bill was supposed to aid such persons in attaining the vocational and education

status they might normally have attained had they not served in the Armed forces (U. S. Congress, 1978). One could rightly ask "How has the Vietnam veteran fared in Higher Education? "Has this generation of warriors benefited from massive federal expenditures on education, particularly since they had full use of the GI Bill? "Have Vietnam veterans as a group been full partners in our attempts to foster and develop a "learning society?"

Any assumptions made about the success or failure of any GI Bill, let alone the Vietnam Era GI Bill, is based on speculation and not research by the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). The only major evidence offered by the DVA regarding veterans achievement is its "college participation rates." Mattila (1978) reports the DVA admitted that these rates have limited value, but nevertheless continued to use them (p. 539). The DVA has spent over $45 billion providing educational benefits to veterans in the last forty-five years (Mattila, 1978), and yet it provides sparse evidence that this money has been well spent.

A DVA monograph (1987) reports that 60% of all Vietnam Era veterans received some training benefit from utilizing the GI Bill. This figure compares quite favorably with the 51% rate for World War II veterans, and the 43% rate for Korean war veterans. The increased participation rates are touted by the DVA as an indication that the social and educational policies underpinning the Vietnam Era GI Bill are being met. It must be kept in mind that the "participation rates" established by the DVA are, in fact, "training starts," and tell us very little about how

veterans finished their educational training, successfully or not.

VIETNAM VETERANS AND EDUCATION

Except during the throes of combat, the path to advancement in rank is through education. If veterans do not know about or value education upon entering the Armed Forces, they will become acutely aware of it during their period of service. Educational values learned in the military tend to carry over into civilian living. Card (1983) notes that Vietnam Era veterans used the GI Bill in large numbers because it provided financial resources that could not be obtained elsewhere. She also notes that veterans as a group tend to be very motivated about education and "return to school and complete a degree program to a greater extent than do nonveterans" (p. 39). It would appear that veterans in general, and Vietnam theater veterans in particular, would be the ones most likely to use the GI Bill, and to benefit socially and economically from its use. However, this assumption is based on speculation and not research.

The research literature does suggest however, that participation in post-secondary education using the GI Bill is problematic for the Vietnam theater veteran. Three distinct reasons reflect the suspicion that "nam vets" had a much more difficult time realizing their college educational goals after discharge from the Armed Forces than did their predecessors. These include the unique nature of the war in Vietnam, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and inadequate GI Bill benefits.

THE NATURE OF THE WAR IN VIETNAM

The ambiguous nature of the war in Vietnam was hardly conducive to developing stable and mature adults. Wilson (1980), and Goodwin (1987) indicate the lack of a moral ideology to justify the war, poor military role models, guerrilla warfare, low unit morale, and excessive use of alcohol and drugs, contributed to a widespread sense of helplessness and loss of control. Upon returning stateside, the Vietnam veteran was an unwelcome outsider; no homecoming for these warriors. Instead, U. S. society had formed a new perception of these men and women. Returning veterans were characterized as "deviant" persons. They were frequently portrayed as "drug-crazed baby killers" (Egendorf, 1982), "time bombs, violent and lawless persons, and alcoholics and drug addicts (Boulanger and Kadushin, 1986).

The psychological and social adjustment required of the returning Vietnam veteran was practically impossible to overcome. Everywhere the veteran turned there was a cold shoulder and a group ready to criticize him. The National Advisory Council on Vocational Education (1972, p. 1) sums up the plight of the Vietnam veteran and the difficulty of not fitting the image of a returning hero:

> "The unpopularity of the war places an additional burden upon the returning veteran. The young veteran finds himself referred to in the print and in conversation as a dope addict or trained killer. Often his own peer group tells him what a fool he was to go in the first place. In his absence they have moved ahead in their life pursuits, while the veteran must start from the beginning as though his military service made no difference."

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

A considerable body of empirically based literature documents the devastating extent to which the previously mentioned predisposing factors of the war in Vietnam affected veterans abilities to recover from these experiences. The ubiquitous and long-standing presence of war trauma stateside is manifested by the mental illness know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The studies of Horowitz and Solomon (1975), Figley (1978a), Figley & Leventman (1980), and Egendorf et al. (1981) have established PTSD is positively correlated to exposure to combat situations; the more one experienced combat stress, the more likely one was to exhibit the delayed symptoms of PTSD. In the most recent effort to document the prevalence of PTSD among Vietnam theater veterans, Kulka et al. (1990) estimates "15.2% of all male theater veterans are current cases of PTSD and this represents about 479,000 persons" (p. xxvii).

Figley (1978b) contends "the nature of the Vietnam combat experience has made a significant and long-lasting impact on the veteran, making the transition back to civilian life difficult" (p. 63). Among these various problems are intimacy with wives or lovers, relationships with children, and a sense of detachment from society, community, and friends (Blank, 1980). Veterans with PTSD are also likely to suffer from survivor guilt, hyperalertness, sleep disturbances, depression, and substance abuse (APA, 1980), all of which detract from ones ability to stay engaged in higher education pursuits.

INADEQUATE ENTITLEMENT BENEFITS

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to higher education was the

poor benefit structure of the GI Bill. Two research studies reveal a great disparity between what was anticipated and what was received. For example, a 1973 report by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) concluded "that Vietnam veterans did not receive as much financial assistance as did WW II veterans when adjustments are made for payment of tuition, fees, and books and supplies" (p. 536). Mattila (1978) concluded Vietnam veterans initially received about 50% less relative benefits than WW II veterans (p. 537). While it is true Vietnam veterans received numerous increases to their subsistence allowance the following two decades, these increases merely raised the relative benefits to the level of Korean veterans which were about 25% less when compared to WW II veterans (Mattila, 1978).

Vietnam veterans had to pay for all college costs directly from their monthly entitlement benefit. Levitan & Cleary (1973) report that on average, "this left the veteran with about $130.00 per month while he was attending school" which limited a veterans choice mainly to public colleges and universities (p. 137). The low benefit structure of the GI Bill also forced veterans to seek other forms of financial income while attending college; the typical alternative was to work. The research of Egendorf et al. (1981) indicated that approximately "two-thirds of all veterans worked full-time for the entirety of the time they were enrolled in educational training, in spite of the fact that the majority of them were attending school full time" (p. 8).

VIETNAM VETERANS GI BILL STUDY

The Vietnam Era GI Bill expired on December 31, 1989. The

widely held notion that this federal entitlement enhanced the upward social and economic mobility of Vietnam theater veterans was challenged in recent research in the State of Florida by Horan (1991). This study was designed to establish overall "college completion rates" for the total respondents. In addition, associations with gender, race, and PTSD were also established. A total of 1,006 usable surveys was obtained from nine targeted urban areas. Special efforts were made to identify and survey female, black, and Hispanic theater veterans. Males accounted for 98.5% or 991 of the total. Fifteen females were surveyed and this accounted for 1.5% or 15 of the total respondents.

Horan found financial matters were the primary reason that veterans decided not to attend college on the GI Bill and the primary reason veterans gave who discontinued college once they were enrolled on the GI Bill. Inadequate entitlement benefits greatly dampened the educational expectations and achievements of those who fought in Vietnam. Reduced benefits also affected where the veterans attended college and how much they had to work. Eighty-nine percent attended a public institution and eighty-two percent indicated they were employed during college; sixty-six percent of whom worked 31 or more hours per week.

Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary educational goal while attending college; 53.1% indicated their goal was "to obtain a college degree." This was followed by 13.7% for "personal knowledge and growth," 11.8% to "retrain for a new career or profession," 8.6% for "advancement at work," 7.6% for "certification in a professional/vocational area," 2.7%

"other," and 2.5% for "remediation to attend another college." Horan found only 47% of Vietnam theater veterans completed their college educational goal. The "college completion rate" for males was 46% and for females it was 50%. Black veterans completed at a 36% rate, Hispanic veterans at a 31% rate, and a small group of "other veterans, mainly American Indians, at a 20% rate. In contrast, white veterans completed their college educational goals at a 49% rate. The more veterans had to work, the less their chance of completing college educational goals. College completion rates were 78% for veterans who worked 1-10 hours per week; 74% for 11-20 hours, 52% for 21-30 hours, 41% for 31-40 hours, and 30% for veterans who worked in excess of 41 hours per week. The association between "hours worked per week" and "college completion" is a very significant inverse relationship and reinforces the idea that inadequate GI Bill benefits made work outside the classroom a necessity for the overwhelming majority of veterans.

The Horan study also linked PTSD with considerable college underachievement. For example, veterans with PTSD completed their college educational goals at a 32% rate. Black and Hispanic veterans with PTSD had about a two out of three chance of not completing college goals, while for white PTSD veterans about one in three would not complete their goal. Veterans with PTSD who worked, regardless of the number of hours per week, showed the lowest rates of college completion in this study - about 20%.

DISCUSSION

Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD were at significant risk of failing to achieve their college educational goals, although for whites this effect was less pronounced. The achievement of minorities was well below that of their white counterparts. These results suggest that whites who were not diagnosed with PTSD may have had greater access to financial, academic, and interpersonal support services, and used them to their educational advantage. These days most mental health professionals are acutely aware of the affect of PTSD on Vietnam theater veterans. However, during the years immediately following the veterans return to civilian living, it was both an insidious and silent menace. Its affect upon ones ability to complete college goals is now associated with reduced achievement and, in many cases, failure.

While this study does not predict, nor explain causality, it does suggest that black, Hispanic, and "other" minorities (mostly American Indians) were at the greatest risk of failure in higher education when compared to their white counterparts. Significant barriers to post-secondary education exist now for minorities, and they existed during the 26 years of the Vietnam Era GI Bill.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many Vietnam veterans, theater and era alike, still cling to a vision of educational advancement in their lifetime. Given the enormous federal budget at this time, it is unlikely that any major federal education initiative for Vietnam veterans will be forthcoming from Washington, D.C. Elected national

representatives will always note the the Vietnam Era GI Bill was extended twice, and that will end any discussion of reviving this entitlement program.

The persistent vision of a third chance at education for these veterans is an opportunity that is best handled at the state level. Several states have legislated educational programs for their Vietnam veterans. Frequently these program involved tuition waivers, legislated financial assistance, or grant made to educational institutions. Community colleges would appear to be the ideal entry point where Vietnam veterans could begin anew their dreams of educational advancement. The men and women are primarily in their late thirties to mid-forties and are very typical of non-traditional students served by community colleges; their potential is great and so are their needs. This student group will likely need all the assistance afforded to other "at risk" college students - financial assistance, remediation, career guidance, and academic support. Community colleges should look for ways to develop their own "Vietnam Veteran Re-Entry Education Programs." Such efforts are underway in the State of Florida.

Vietnam veterans need the traditional caring expertise offered by community colleges more than ever. These warriors are the sons and daughters of us all. What is owed to this generation of late developing students is the same concern and effort we show to all our citizens. We owe them nothing less - and they expect nothing more!

About the author: Dr. J. Michael Horan is a Vietnam veteran whose dissertation research focused on the Vietnam Era G. I. Bill. Dr. Horan was a faculty member at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio before entering the Higher Education Leadership program at Florida State University. Currently he is an health occupations education program specialist for the State of Florida.

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